

from Claude Fredericks : Pawlet (Vermont) U. S. A.

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F. KEPPEL

Dear Mr Keppel, certain personal circumstances kept me from writing to you before, but I hope that what I have to say now can still be of some use to you and your committee. It isnt really that I have much to add to what I said to you that snowy Sunday morning two weeks ago, but perhaps I can say it with a little more coherence now. It wasnt merely the early hour and the icy roads and the strangeness of the circumstance that caused my incoherence then but rather the fact that I was saying for a first time to anyone a number of things I feel very deeply about, devoted to Bennington as I am. If they tumbled forth in disjunctive profusion then, it was because of the stress of too much feeling. Perhaps I can speak a little more objectively now even though I still believe that a handful of individuals have done the most reprehensible kind of harm not only to one individual but to the College itself.

Fredericks

I have, to repeat what I said then, been teaching literature at Bennington for fifteen years, and when Mr Belitt retires next year, I shall be the senior member of the Literature Division. And for a year and a half now I have been the representative for literature to the FEPC. I have in consequence been part of a good many discussions that involved, among others, Don Brown, Rush Welter, Gail Parker, Ron Cohen, Alvin Feinman, and Rein van der Linde.

Let me begin by saying a few things about the events that took place in November & December. On November 11

I was unexpectedly invited to an unscheduled meeting---purportedly of the FEPC---by Mr van der Linde in his office at lunchtime. I couldnt, because of other obligations, attend, but I learned later that it had been a meeting that excluded both the president and the student members and was called only to get signatures for a document, already written, that was later in the week sent to the Trustees as if it were ~~the~~ in some way the FEPC's. Immediately after the meeting that day Mr van der Linde came to my office with the document, asking me to make the document unanimously approved by adding my own signature. Reading it through while he waited I found I took strong exception to much of it---for reasons I later expressed in a galley---and refused to sign it. Mr van der Linde, surprised, insisted I talk with Don Brown, and I said I'd try to. But later in the afternoon,

before I had had a chance to get in touch with Mr Brown, Mr Brown came to my office and spent a full hour trying to persuade me I must join in their condemnation of the president and the Futures Committee's Report. The following days there was a good deal of intensive lobbying on the part of a few faculty members, and it was not surprising that the Faculty on November 19, when it met, refused to discuss the Report and voted to adjourn and reconvene without the President. It seemed to me then---and seems to me not---that a few members of the Faculty, in part out of personal vindictiveness and ambition, were seeking to defeat a serious committee report that sought to solve urgent problems, without even discussing the contents, to slander and dismiss a president without proper accusation or proof. The subsequent faculty meetings, led by Mr van der Linde, and the subsequent FEPC meetings, seemed to me for several obvious reasons improper, and I refused to attend them until they were again properly constituted. It seemed to me necessary for the Trustees to affirm this fact, and I was happy when they finally did. The FEPC---reorganised as the 'steering' committee in part, I was told by a member, so that Alvin Feinman, a member of the FPC, could have a voice there---was not unanimous in any of its purportedly unanimous statements. People were present at these meetings who had not been elected, and at least one elected member was consistently and purposefully absent. The impression that has been given, that the faculty and the students both are almost unanimously against it both the President and the Report, has been the result of ~~my~~ manipulation, I think, on the part of a few individuals---chiefly by Don Brown and Alvin Feinman---and these individuals have been mostly from their two divisions, the Social Science Division and the Literature Division. Don Brown has in several conversations over the years made clear to me his disappointment at not having been considered as a candidate for the presidency of the College. He has been publicly at ~~my~~ odds for a number of years, in a most outspoken fashion, with Ruth Elter. That Mr Elter was on the Futures Committee and had influence---from my own point of view a most beneficial influence---on the President's attitudes---was, quite naturally, an intolerable situation for ~~me~~. It should be remembered, too, that these two divisions are the ones that the Report particularly criticizes and from which the major

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* Mr Brown

cuts in personnel are proposed. It should be said, too, that these two divisions ~~unusually~~ have for a number of years been the weakest in the College, anomalies, one might say, whose attitudes ran counter to what I understand Bennington stands for, conventional and dessicated in their attitudes. Last year the FEPC severely criticised at length the Literature Division for the fact it did not properly discharge its duty to teach students how to write, that it did not give students, as well, proper opportunities for creative work, etc., etc. This document was answered by another---but one full of pious platitudes that simply denied a situation that in fact exists. Mr Feinman has been outspoken in his opposition to the FEPC's criticism of the Lit Division, and it is natural he would dislike them even more when they ~~are~~ embodied in the Report of the Futures Committee.

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1 That has these weeks passed as revolution that stood for freedom, integrity, and innovation, has been nothing more than a political coup, as far as I can see, of the extreme right, one manipulated by a few individuals primarily for their own private and selfish ends. It makes me remember all too vividly European politics in the thirties. Mr Brown, Mr Feinman, and most of the others who have been involved, stand for the most reactionary, authoritarian, and conventional aspects of the College. Mr Brown's attitudes when he was ~~unusually~~ acting president---and when he was Mr Bloustein's Dean---offered abundant evidence of this. Innumerable statements that Mr Feinman has made at meetings of the Literature Division convince me of this. Miss ~~Phillips~~ and Mr Fristman are essentially in agreement with Mr Feinman in these things, and all of them bring to Bennington attitudes that are in no way consonant with the stated aims and attitudes of the College. They are little concerned with student creativity, they are often scornful of student freedom and initiative. They would turn the Literature Division into something not very different from the literature department of any big university. The attitude of the small clique that has been so outspoken these weeks do not, I think, represent at all the attitudes of many silent members of the Faculty. I am thinking particularly of members of the Music and Art Divisions who have recently expressed their views to me---Mr Baker, for example, and Miss

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Ford for example---and of Mr Tillin's extended statement against recent 'steering committee' action at the last Faculty meeting. It also to be remembered, too, that several of the student leaders were protégés of those faculty members most rabidly against the President. Tom Matthers was writing his thesis with Don Brown. ~~He~~ told me that he, when he first read the Report, had been favorably impressed by it but later, after 'talking with other people', had realised that it was sheer 'Bonapartism' and anti-democratic. But He regretted the fact that the New York Times in its interview with him had made it seem that the students were unanimously against the President since this simply was 'not the case'. Kristin Lippincott lives with Miss Paglia, and Miss Paglia has been the protégé of Mr Weinman for some time. It was he more than anyone---except ironically enough Mrs Barker herself---who kept Miss Paglia from being fired several years ago when, because of a particular scandalous circumstance, everyone thought she should be.

Over the years I have watched a number of proposals made in all seriousness to the Faculty. The Golden Book--- Mr Walter's, Mr Hyman's, and Mrs Aron's---was submitted the year I first began to teach at the College. But the Faculty, like an educated ostrich, has stubbornly insisted over and over there was no 'crisis', that the economic difficulties could be solved by fundraising and that the corrosion of educational values were illusory---and have, usually with very little serious discussion, voted down every proposal submitted to it. Insisting it had 'educational prerogative' it was, no ever, incapable of making any viable alternative proposal. It was not, in the light of all this, surprising that a few people could quickly & excite a furor over a Report and its purported author. Because there is such division of attitude within the Faculty itself about educational goals---and I will say something about why I think that this is so in a moment---the procedure by which the Report was arrived at was, it seems ~~to~~ only conceivable one. Very few members of the Faculty are capable of any longer view of the College. Divisionalizing it self increases this. I fear that once the present crisis is over---and if nothing is done---the Faculty will

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fall to squabbling, against themselves again. That's a sad thought, but fifteen years of attending meetings of various kinds makes me fear that it is true.

Let me say something now about Mrs Parker and her capacities as president. When I came to Bennington, William Fols was president. He was a kind and honest man, an intelligent man, but he was remote from the real issues that concerned the College. There was, after his retirement, as again there was for other reasons after Mr Bloustein's, unfortunate interregnums where the president could not act with authority. Mr Bloustein indeed had authority and was concerned with issues that mattered, but he was a manipulative and unscrupulously ambitious man who very quickly alienated, for many different reasons, the entire faculty. He had little understanding of the values and ideas that motivated Bennington, and he brought another set, his own, that had no place here. These years, under these several presidents, brought Bennington, I think, into its present difficulties. And when the time came to choose a new president four years ago, I thought the choice was a crucial matter and that the survival of Bennington---at least in any way that mattered---depended on that choice. When Mrs Parker was chosen, I was disappointed. She seemed too young and too inexperienced, incapable of handling a faculty that was stubborn and intractable. Her manner seemed disarmingly patronising, not merely towards people but towards the College itself. She seemed to have little real understanding of that little Bennington unique, considering it, I thought, quaint and antiquated by Cambridge standards, neither scholarly nor serious. She seemed---at least in the press---to be ambitious and self-promoting, perhaps even contenting to use Bennington as a stepping stone---the way Mr Bloustein had---somewhere else. All this troubled me deeply, but I tried to suspend any kind of judgement for the time being and give her the benefit of every doubt. I found myself at first disagreeing with her too over issues and attitudes. I was troubled at her determination to accept Federal money and involve the College in strictures it had always admirably stayed free of. I disliked her zealous fervor about Equal Opportunities and her saying, among other things, our faculty ratio should in five years reflect the population ratio in regard to men and blacks and this

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members of the Faculty should not, for this very reason, on occasion be required. I thought she dealt in an unsatisfactory way with the whole issue of black music at Bennington. There was beginning to be, I thought, because of her, a kind of legalism about faculty and student obligations, a new reliance on rules and regulations, that ran counter to what I understood Bennington, in its radical concern with self-reliance and personal freedom, stood for.

But early I began to ~~won~~ over, and ~~it~~ ^{is} to ~~as~~ she is the first president I've known at Bennington who has my wholehearted admiration and support. It seems to me she is an exceptional ~~xxxxxx~~ person in every way and just the person to have chosen at this crucial moment in the College's history. She is better equipped than anyone I can think of to help it be again what it should be. What I had liked from the very start was the fact that she could listen, that she listened to Bennington, as Mr Bloustein had, with a package of proposals and ~~xxxxxx~~. The first years she was here she by and large listened and learned and tried to understand. After a while I came to realize the patronizing manner was simply a marvelous kind of matter-of-factness that bluntly let her say what she thought in expecting everyone else to do the same. And after she spoke she always listened. She was from the start available to anyone who wanted to talk with her about any matter whatsoever. She did what she said. She was honest. She seemed, and seems, entirely free of that manipulativeness that had finally turned the whole community ~~xxxxxx~~ against Mr Bloustein. And most important of all she could not only learn---but she could change and ~~re~~. And that is, I think, exactly what happened. Little by little I began to sense that not only did she understand, in some very deep ways, what Bennington was up to---but that ~~it~~ was coming to have a deep respect for its use and purpose. She came to realize, correctly I think, that if Bennington was to survive in any way that matter of, it must indeed have an identity and continue to do something superbly well that other colleges couldn't, even with more money and other facilities, do. And she came to realize, I think, that that identity should indeed be the reaffirmation of what it had, one way or another, always been ~~but~~ was near to losing. In these past two years, ~~she~~ chiefly

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because of Mrs. Parker, I have begun to be filled with a new optimism about the College's future I haven't had before. Mrs. Parker had an active part in the splendid legislation of the FEPC in the past two years---its more rigorous viewing of individual divisions in the context of the whole College, the abolishment of teaching assistants & of grades, an insistence on the use of creativity and induction as pedagogy---that has seemed to be restoring Bennington to itself. And the Report of the Futures Committee has confirmed all this in my own mind. She had already begun to take a stand against two of the evils that have increasingly plagued the College---the power of the divisions and the increasing tendency to one kind of professionalism or another---but this took courage and was not bound to be popular. Her willingness to espouse and call her 'own' a program---the one that proposed in the Report---that must---if only because it called for a radical reduction of the faculty, for making tuitions pay educational expenses, for ending divisional control and the tendency to professionalism---caused angry opposition*was an example of courage I admire. She says what she thinks and says what she believes. Though certain members of the Faculty are, of course, very much against her, I feel that she has strong support in each of the divisions and could in time win the support of most of the Faculty. I cannot imagine any one in his right mind---except perhaps Don Brown---accepting the presidency of Bennington at this point if the Trustees do not firmly stand behind her now, recognizing her contract and affirming their belief in her capacities. Nothing else, at this point, can save the College.

Finally let me say a few words about the Report itself since it is so hard to be separated from the other issues that are being considered by your committee. My first concern was that the Report receive a serious and proper discussion. That was my concern even before I knew what was in it, and it is all the more so now that I have read it carefully. As I have said, it was proper that the Futures Committee was constituted as it was. There is too much private and divisional prejudice at Bennington to allow most members of the Faculty to see the College as a whole. The Report, in wishing to reaffirm the ideals that originally motivated the College,

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is correct. ~~They~~ offer a valuable kind of education, marvelous for at least a small number of people, that is not available anywhere. ~~To compete at doing what the College cannot do as well and that universities do much better is illadvised.~~ It can hope to exist only by doing some things superbly well, as it has in the past, that other colleges don't do. That has ~~unwittingly~~ corroded and obscured these ideals in recent years has been twofold. First, there has, until Mr. Parker came, been a series of unfortunate presidents who could not, for different reasons, guide the College as it needed to be guided, as indeed it was guided in the early years of the College. Second, increasing numbers of faculty members have been hired without any consideration of how effectively they fitted into a very special situation--how well, for example, they could do serious counselling, how well they could teach not in lecture but in small seminar situations, how much they respected student freedom and student participation, how much they saw ~~in~~ creativity and inductive methods as pedagogical devices, how seriously they took private tutorials. All this has, too, brought people to the College who encountered one form of professionalism or another. ~~Increasingly~~ (The presence of male students and the present economic situation have of course been additional factors in encouraging something antithetical to the Bennington idea of an education. It takes patience and courage and persistence to insist that the best preparation for many kinds of profession is indeed just the kind of education Bennington offers. It takes courage, too, to run counter to such opinions and explain that the issue of 'freedom' is much more at stake in the present force of the divisions than in any kind of authority of either the President or the Trustees. But the Report has just this kind of ~~unhappy~~ courage. There are many details of the Report that demand discussion. I myself am particularly concerned with reaffirming the importance of counselling in the College to make just effective the very proposals the Report recommends. And I feel---if other kinds of sacrifice are to be justified---that students and teachers must have the guarantee that classes will be even smaller than they are at present. There are means, however, of such achievement both these goals in the very terms of the Report. What is important

about the Report is that it puts its finger on much that is wrong with the College at present and that it reaffirms in no uncertain terms what the essential nature of the College is and should be.

I am sorry that it has taken so many pages to say these things. It is an unpleasant task, saying some of the things I felt it was necessary for me to say here if I was honest, but I hope there is something useful in it for your committee's deliberations. Even though I spent only thirty minutes speaking with you and the other members of the Committee the other morning I came away with a happy impression, confident that you had the very qualities needed just now to make the wise decisions necessary. It's a hard task you have. All my good wishes go with you in your work.

Cordially

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